

# BIRDS

PHILADELPHIA: NOVEMBER, 1852.

## THE PINNATED GROUSE AND THE RUFFLED GROUSE.

BY C. W. WEBBER,

AUTHOR OF "OLD HICKS," "THE HUNTER NATURALIST," &c. &c.

The red-man is not the only aboriginal race upon our continent, concerning whom it might have been pathetically prophesied: the places which knew them once, shall know them no more; many numerous races of birds and animals have disappeared along with their original foes. Step by step they have been driven from the haunts they once frequented, and over vast districts once all their own. They now retain possession of small and isolated spots, where they continue to look back with lingering longing over the fair domain, from which they have been ruthlessly driven.

Such has been peculiarly the case with the Prairie Hen, which, in the strong resemblance of its fate, and in many of its habits, may be properly styled the feathered prototype of the North American Indian. They once swarmed over a vast proportion of the Northern and Middle Districts. Like the Indians, they were so indomitably fixed and wild in their habits, that extermination or flight before the encroaching power of the white race, has been their only alternative. Like them, they held in fee simple the wide nut-bearing woods, with all the privileges and perquisites thereof, since time immemorial. Like them, they have lingered long round the graves of their feathered forefathers, and wherever a nook of refuge has been gained, where the destroyer might not reach them, they yet haunt the scenes of by-gone prosperity. As, for instance, although there is scarcely a Pinnated Grouse to be met with in any of the Atlantic States, where the Puritans found them covering the earth, except among the mountains; yet in Martha's Vineyard, one of the Elizabeth Islands, they continue to be found in sufficient numbers to justify the annual resort of a limited party of sportsmen, to hunt them. Nashawenna, a small island on which they are kept as a sort of preserve, is the only other one of the group on which they are found. They also frequent such dense or barren places as the "brushy" plains of Long Island, Mount Desert Island, in the State of Maine, and other rough and inaccessible localities in that State and in New Jersey. In Southern Kentucky, where I can just remember them in my boyhood, as abundant—that is, sufficiently so to afford good sport—they were not to be found at all by the time I had reached manhood;

and yet I have often heard my parents tell of their numbers when they first settled in Hopkinstown. They came into the gardens of the town, destroyed their fruit trees and vegetables, and even carried their audacity so far as to come down into the house-yards and fight with the domestic fowls. Boys and negroes killed great numbers of them with sticks and stones, while very few thought them worth shooting at at all, except to drive them away for mischief. They were regarded as pests and nuisances, and caught in traps and pens, in immense quantities, to be thrown to the hogs.

In spite of these almost incredible numbers, how short a time has it taken to despoil them even of this, the "Garden of the West;" yet here, too, they still linger, and, as if in affectionate reluctance to leave so lovely a home; they may now occasionally be startled from the vicinity of the beautiful groves or timber islands, scattered over the flowery plains of the rich "Barrens."

The Ruffed Grouse, or the Partridge, as it is miscalled at the North, and Pheasant, as it is known at the West, still retains almost undisputed possession of these favorite feeding grounds since the abdication of its former rival and conqueror.

These two birds have been strangely confounded even by sportsmen—and there are a great many intelligent men among them—North and South, who persist in getting the names of the birds wrong, one way or another. The case seems to be about this:—the Puritans found the Ruffed and Pinnated Grouse in the woods and plains of the new country. The Ruffed Grouse, the plumage of which is lighter at the North, reminded them most of the Grey Partridge of Great Britain. Not having much idle time to spare for careful ornithological classification, they christened the bird Partridge, off-hand, in memory of the old country, and, Partridge it has been called ever since by their descendants, except when they in *their* hurry have confounded it with the Prairie Hen or Pinnated Grouse, to which it bears nothing more than the general family resemblance. Since the gradual disappearance of the Prairie Hen, this confusion has become worse confounded—it being pretty generally understood that the name Partridge has been misapplied to one of the two common spe-

cies of Grouse—but which becomes the question?

Specimens of the Prairie Hen have become so difficult to obtain for the purposes of comparison, that the whole subject has been left pretty much to conjecture, and the Ruffed Grouse still holds its place and its name of Partridge at the North. Now, this name is just as appropriate as that applied to the same bird west of the Alleghanies. There, from the darker color which its plumage assumes, toward the Southwest it has been called the Pheasant. We have but one species of Pheasant on the Continent, called the American Pheasant, and that is a very rare inhabitant of the Rocky Mountains, so that it is hardly necessary to go far to show that such an application of the name is an absurd misnomer. We have the same ridiculous jumble of names in the instance of the Virginian Partridge, which in the Northeastern and Middle Districts is called Quail, as a sort of diminutive of their supposed Partridge—however, they have the name right in the South and West, where it is known as the Partridge. It is quite amusing to hear the epicures from the different sections, correcting each other over a dish of so common a bird.

Now, once for all, let us set this matter straight—1st. The proper name of the Partridge of the North and Eastern States is the Ruffed Grouse, which is also improperly called Pheasant west of the Alleghanies, the American Pheasant being our only species. 2d. The proper name for the Pinnated Grouse is not Partridge either, but its common name is Prairie Hen. 3d. The Virginian Partridge is the only one of the species we have on the Continent, and it is improperly called a Quail, of which we have not a single variety! We have two or three other varieties of the Grouse, which are, however, less noted, and are so exclusively confined to the high Northern regions, that they are not likely to much increase the confusion which exists with regard to the nomenclature of this family—the principal of these are the Willow Grouse, which is found in the deep forests and mountain fastnesses of Maine, north, to the swamps of Labrador—and the Spotted or Canada Grouse, which is found also in the heart of the dark pine swamps of much the same general localities—but the Ruffed and Pinnated Grouse are the most generally sought, and, of course, interesting varieties, and we shall, therefore, principally endeavor to illustrate the differences between these two.

The most curious peculiarities of these Grouse, consist in their different and fierce modes of adjusting matters in the love season, and the extraordinary sounds produced by the males at this period. As the most striking marks of distinction between them, we will quote here accurate accounts of their ferocious love scenes, and of the mode in which the sounds referred to are produced by both birds. No naturalist has been more absolutely faithful than J. J. Audubon in such descriptions. We quote him concerning the Pinnated Grouse:

"As soon as the snows have melted away, and the first blades of grass issue from the earth, announcing the approach of spring, the Grouse, which had congregated during the winter in great

flocks, separate into parties of from twenty to fifty or more. Their mating season commences, and a spot is pitched upon to which they daily resort. The male birds, before the first glimpse of day lightens the horizon, fly swiftly and singly from their grassy beds, to meet, to challenge, and to fight the various rivals led by the same impulse to the arena. The male is at this season attired in his full dress, and enacts his part in a manner not surpassed in pomposity by any other bird. Imagine them assembled, to the number of twenty, by daybreak: see them all strutting in the presence of each other, mark the consequential gestures, their looks of disdain, and their angry pride as they pass each other. Their tails, spread out and inclined forwards, to meet the expanded feathers of their necks, like stiffened frills, lie supported by the globular orange-colored receptacle of air, from which their singular booming sounds proceed. Their wings, like those of the Turkey Cock, are stiffened and declined so as to rub and rustle on the ground, as the bird passes rapidly along. Their bodies are depressed towards the ground, the fire of their eyes evinces the pugnacious workings of the mind, their notes fill the air around, and at the very first answer from some coy female—the battle rages. Like Game Cocks they strike, and rise in the air to meet their assailants with greater advantage. Now many close in the encounter; feathers are seen whirling in the agitated air, or falling round them tinged with blood. The weaker begin to give way, and one after another seeks refuge in the neighboring bushes. The remaining few greatly exhausted, maintain their ground, and withdraw slowly and proudly as if each claimed the honors of the victory. The vanquished and the victors then search for the females, who, believing each to have returned from the field in triumph, receive them with joy.

"It not unfrequently happens that a male, already mated, is suddenly attacked by some disappointed rival, who unexpectedly pounces upon him after a flight of considerable length, having been attracted by the cacklings of the happy couple. The female invariably squats near to and almost under the breast of her lord, while he, always ready for action, throws himself on his daring antagonist, and chases him away never to return.

"In such places in the Western country as I have described, the 'Prairie Hen' is heard 'booming' or 'tooting,' not only before break of day, but frequently at all hours from morning till sunset; but in districts where these birds have become wild in consequence of the continual interference of man, they are seldom heard after sunrise: sometimes these meetings are noiseless, their battles are much less protracted, or of less frequent occurrence, and their beats or scratching grounds are more concealed. Many of the young males have battles even in the autumn, when the females generally join, not to fight, but to conciliate them, in the manner of the Wild Turkeys.

"The curious notes emitted in the mating season are peculiar to the male. When the receptacles of air, which, in form, color and size, resemble a small orange, are perfected inflated, the bird lowers its head to the ground, opens its bill,

and sends forth, as it were, the air contained in these bladders in distinctly separate notes, rolling one after another from loud to low, and producing a sound like to a muffled drum. This done, the bird immediately erects itself, refills its receptacles by inhalation, and again proceeds with its tootings.

"I frequently observed in these Prairie Hens, a number of which I had tamed at Henderson, that after producing the noise, the bags lost their roundness, and assumed the appearance of a burst bladder, but that in a few seconds they were again inflated. Having caught one of the birds, I passed the point of a pin through each of its air-cells, the consequence of which was that it was unable to toot any more. With another bird, I performed the same operation on one only of the cells, and next morning it tooted with the sound one, although not so loudly as before, but could not inflate the one which had been punctured. The sound, in my opinion, cannot be heard at a much greater distance than a mile. All my endeavors to decoy this species, by imitating its curious sounds, were unsuccessful, although the Ruffed Grouse is easily deceived in this manner. As soon as the strutting and fighting are over, the collapsed bladders are concealed by the feathers of the ruff, and during autumn and winter are much reduced in size. These birds, indeed, seldom, if ever, meet in groups on the scratching grounds after incubation has taken place; at all events, I have never seen them fight after that period; for, like the Wild Turkeys, after spending a few weeks apart to recover their strength, they gradually unite, and as soon as the young are grown up, individuals of both sexes mix with the latter, and continue in company till spring. The young males exhibit the bladders and elongated feathers of the neck before the first winter, and by the next spring have attained maturity, although, as in many other species, they increase in size and beauty for several years."

To this concise and accurate account of Mr. Audubon's, we would only add that on the prairies of the North-west, of Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, &c., where they still abound in innumerable flocks, the scenes described above occur on a much grander scale, and are attended even with considerable carnage. The strange "booming" of these birds, heard far and near on every side, confounds the stranger unutterably, and he is with difficulty made to understand that sounds of such volume are made by a comparatively small bird. Indeed, it may be remarked that the habits of the bird are most essentially changed, as well as the color of its plumage, by a residence on the great plains of the West. The most extraordinary phenomenon produced by the necessities of the climate, as a protection against the terrible winds which sweep over these apparently immeasurable levels, at the approach of winter, consists, in the assembling of these birds, from a distance of many miles around, to roost on the same spot, something after the manner of the Wild Pigeon. This fact seems to have escaped Mr. Audubon's notice.

At the opening of winter, a spot is selected, on the open prairies, in the upper part of the Missouri country, which is more sheltered than the

surrounding region, by the character of the ground, from the biting force of the north-west winds. Here the Prairie Hens begin to assemble early in the evening, and by the time dusk comes on immense numbers are collected. They approach the scene in small flocks, in a leisurely manner, by short flights. They approach the place of gathering silently, with nothing of that whirr of wings, for which they are noted when they are suddenly put up, but they make ample amends when they arrive; as in the Pigeon roost, there is a continual roar, caused by the restless shifting of the birds, and sounds of impatient struggle emitted by them, which can be heard distinctly for several miles. The numbers collected are incalculably immense, since the space covered by them sometimes extends for over a mile in length, with a breadth determined by the character of the ground.

This is a most astonishing scene. When approached in the early part of the night on horseback, the hubbub is strangely discordant, and overwhelmingly deafening. They will permit themselves to be killed in great numbers with sticks, or any convenient weapon, without the necessity of using guns. They, however, when frequently disturbed in the first of the season, will easily change their roosting-place, but when the heavy snows have fallen, by melting which by the heat of their bodies, and by trampling it down, they have formed a sort of sheltered yard, the outside walls of which defend them against the winds, they are not easily driven away by any degree of persecution. Indeed, at this time, they become so emaciated as to afford but little inducement to any human persecutors, by whom they are seldom troubled, indeed, on account of the remoteness of their locations; from foxes, wolves, hawks, and owls, &c., their natural enemies, they have, of course, to expect no mercy at any time.

The noise of their restless cluckings, flutterings and shiftings begins to subside a few hours after dark. The birds have now arranged themselves for the night, nestled as close as they can be wedged, every bird with his breast turned towards the wind that may be prevailing. This scene is one of the most curious that can be imagined, especially when they have the moonlight on the snow to contrast with their dark backs. At this time, they may be killed by cart-loads, as only those in the immediate neighborhood of the aggressor are disturbed, apparently. They rise to the height of a few feet, with a stupefied and aimless fluttering, and plunge into the snow, within a short distance, where they are easily taken by the hand. In these helpless conditions, such immense numbers are destroyed that the family would be in danger of rapid extermination, but that the fecundity of the survivors keeps pace with the many fatalities to which they are liable.

Wherever they may be found, this propensity to collect in numbers, smaller or greater, during cold weather, to roost in low spots of ground, has been observed, and Mr. Audubon mentions the circumstance of his having caught a great many of them—which he had observed resorting to the long grass of a bit of low, marshy land near his

house—by simply making his negroes, each with a torch in hand, carry down a drag fishing net to the marsh, which they dropped over the right spot, which had been carefully marked.

They naturally throng together to obtain mutually the benefit of the heat of their bodies against the cold, and in proportion as the cold becomes excessive in those districts where they most abound, does the necessity of these assemblages increase, until they become gradually developed into the curious phenomenon we have attempted to convey an idea of above.

But, to continue the proposed distinction between the two varieties of Grouse.—The Ruffed Grouse roosts upon trees, except during the snow, when it sometimes finds a shelter, singly, by burying itself beneath it, as is done by the Northern Hare. It resorts most to the thickets and dense groves—but both winter and summer—for breeding, roosting and feeding; while the Pinnated Grouse keep on the plains and open country, for all these purposes. The "drumming" of the Ruffed Grouse is a very different affair from the "tooting" of the Prairie Hen. Hear, likewise, a description of this curious proceeding from the source we have already quoted:—

"Early in April, the Ruffed Grouse begins to drum immediately after dawn, and again towards the close of day. As the season advances, the drumming is repeated more frequently at all hours of the day; and where these birds are abundant, this curious sound is heard from all parts of the woods in which they reside.—The drumming is performed in the following manner:—The male bird, standing erect on a prostrate decayed trunk, raises the feathers of its body, in the manner of a Turkey Cock, draws its head towards its tail, erecting the feathers of the latter at the same time, and raising its ruff around the neck, suffers its wings to droop, and struts about on the log. A few moments elapse, when the bird draws the whole of its feathers close to its body, and stretches itself out, beats its sides with its wing, in the manner of the Domestic Cock, but more loudly, and with such rapidity of motion, after a few of the first strokes, as to cause a tremor in the air not unlike the rumbling of distant thunder. This, kind reader, is the 'drumming' of the Pheasant. In perfectly calm weather it may be heard at the distance of two hundred yards, but might be supposed to proceed from a much greater distance. The female, which never drums, flies directly to the place where the male is thus engaged."

We have now an outline of the principal points of difference between the birds. I will only say in conclusion—that shooting the Ruffed Grouse is very precarious sport, except when the snows are very deep, and then they soon become too lean and helpless to escape. Though a very robust bird, they are frequently thinned off very much by the severities of the Northern winters. The most common mode of hunting them by those who kill them for market, or for the love of slaughter, is with a sharp, active cur dog, whose vehement barking causes them to take to a tree close at hand, where they sit still and permit the approach of the gunner. But, this is only half the battle: they usually fly into the tops of the

trees, and straightening themselves up, they smooth down the feathers of the body close to the body, and as they remain perfectly motionless, they are astonishingly difficult to distinguish—so perfectly does their color blend with that of the trunk or boughs. When once discovered, they are easily shot—even to the great part of the flock that may have been flushed. The sport of shooting the Pinnated Grouse is now so curtailed in the North-eastern Districts, as not to furnish sufficient general interest for a detailed description—while that of slaughtering them by wholesale in the North-west, where they so greatly abound, is hardly a theme which will bear dwelling upon with pleasure.

A gentleman of veracity, who recently collected a number of different specimens of the humming bird in Mexico, tells an interesting story about the manner in which birds, belonging to one of the smallest of this family, were in the habit of catching the flies that had got entangled in a spider's web. "The house I resided in for several weeks," he says, "was only a story high, enclosing, like most of the Spanish houses, a small garden in the centre, the roof projecting some six or seven feet from the walls, covering a walk all round, and having a small space only between the tiles and the trees which grew in the centre. From the edges of these tiles to the branches of the trees in the garden, multitudes of spiders had spread their webs, so closely and compactly that they resembled one vast net. I frequently watched, with much amusement, the cautious manœuvres of the humming bird, who, advancing under the web, entered the various cells in search of flies. As the larger spiders did not tamely surrender their prey, the thief was often compelled to retreat. Being within a few feet of the parties, I could notice distinctly all they did. The active little bird generally passed once or twice round the court, as if to reconnoitre his ground, and then commenced his attacks by going carefully under the nets of the wily insect, and seizing, by surprise, the smallest or feeblest of the flies that were entangled in the web. In ascending the traps of the spider, great care and skill were required. Sometimes he had scarcely room for his little wings to perform their office, and the least deviation would have entangled him in the machinery of the web, and caused his ruin. It was only the works of the smaller spider that he dare attack, as the largest rose to the defence of their citadels, when the cunning enemy would shoot off like a sunbeam, and could only be traced by his shining colors. The bird usually spent about ten minutes at a time, in this enterprise, after which he would always alight on a tree near by, and rest himself awhile."

That ardent admirer of nature, Mrs. Child, tells a pretty anecdote about a family of swallows which she was acquainted with. "Two barn swallows," she says, "came into our wood-shed in the spring-time. Their busy, earnest twitterings, led me at once to suspect they were looking out a building spot; but as a carpenter's bench was under the window, and very frequently hammering, sawing, and planing were going on, I had little hope that they would choose a location under our roof. To my surprise, however, they soon began to build in the crotch of a beam over the open door-way. I was delighted, and spent more time watching than 'penny-wise' people would have approved. It was, in fact, a beautiful little drama of domestic love. The mother bird was so busy, and so important; and her mate was so attentive! Never did any newly-married couple take more satisfaction with their first nicely arranged drawer of baby clothes, than they did in fashioning their little woven cradle.

"The father bird scarcely ever left the side of the nest. There he was all day long, twittering in tones that were most obviously the outpourings of love. Sometimes he would bring in a straw, or hair, to be interwoven in the previous little fabric. One day, my attention was arrested by a very unusual twittering, and I saw him circling round, with a large downy feather in his bill. He bent over the unfinished nest, and offered it to his mate with the most graceful and loving air imaginable; and when she put up her mouth to take it, he poured forth such a gust of gladsome sound! It seems as if pride and affection had swelled his heart till it was almost too big for his little bosom.

"When the young became old enough to fly, anybody would have laughed to watch the manoeuvres of the parents! Such a chirping and twittering! Such diving down from the nest, and flying up again! Such wheeling round in circles, talking to the young ones all the while! Such clinging to the sides of the shed with their sharp claws, to show the timid little fledglings that there was no need of falling! For three days all this was carried on with increasing activity. It was obviously an infant flying school. But all their talking and fussing was of no avail. The little things looked down, then looked up, but alarmed at the infinity of space, sunk down into the nest again. At length, the parents grew impatient, and summoned their neighbors. As I was picking up chips one day, I found my head

encircled by a swarm of swallows. They flew up to the nest, and jabbered away to the young ones; they clung to the walls, looking back to tell how the thing was done; they dived, and wheeled, and balanced, and floated in a manner perfectly beautiful to behold. The pupils were evidently much excited. They jumped on the edge of the nest, and twittered, and shook their feathers, and waved their wings, and then hopped back again, saying, 'It's pretty sport, but we can't do it.' Three times the neighbors came and repeated their graceful lesson. The third time, two of the young birds gave a sudden plunge downward, and then fluttered and hopped till they lighted on a small upright log. And oh, such praises as were warbled by the whole troop! The air was filled with their joy! Some were flying around, swift as a ray of light; others were perched on the hoe handle, and the teeth of the rake; multitudes clung to the wall, after the fashion of their pretty kind, and two were swinging, in most graceful style, on a pendent hoop. Never, while memory lasts, shall I forget the swallow party."

Great stories are told about the nest-building of the orchard starling. Wilson, who, all must admit, is pretty good authority in matters of this kind, gives a very particular account of the way in which the nest is put together. He says the bird commonly hangs its nest from the twigs of an apple tree. The outside is made of a particular kind of long, tough grass, that will bend without breaking; and this grass is knit or sewed through and through in a thousand directions, just as if done with a needle. The little creature does it with its feet and bill. Mr. Wilson says that he one day showed one of these nests to an old lady, and she was so much struck with the work, that she asked him, half in earnest, if he did not think that these birds could be taught to *dark stockings*? Mr. Wilson took the pains, too, to draw out one of these grass threads, and found that it measured thirteen inches, and in that distance the bird who used it had passed it in and out thirty-four times.

The following anecdote I relate on the authority of Wilson:—"A box," he says, "fitted up in the window of the room where I slept, was taken possession of by a pair of wrens. Already the nest was built, and two eggs laid; when, one day, the window being open, as well as the door, the female wren, venturing too far into the room, was sprung upon by the cat, and destroyed. Curious to know how the surviving wren would act in the circumstances, I watched him carefully for several days. At first, he sang with great spirit. This continued for an hour or two. After this, becoming uneasy, he went off for an hour. On his return, he chanted again, as before, and went to the top of the house, stable and weeping willow, so that his mate would hear him; but seeing nothing of her, he returned once more, visited the nest, ventured cautiously into the window, gazed about with suspicious looks, his voice sinking into a low, sad tone, as he stretched his neck in every direction. Returning to the box, he seemed for some minutes quite at a loss what to do, and soon

went off, as I thought, altogether, for I saw no more of him that day. Toward the afternoon of the second day, he again made his appearance, in company with another female, who seemed exceedingly shy, and, though not until after a great deal of hesitation, entered the box. At this moment, the little widower seemed as if he would warble his very life out with joy. They afterward raised a brood of seven young ones, all of whom left the nest, at the proper time, in safety."

A laughable story of some carrier pigeons is told in an Antwerp newspaper. The editor of a celebrated journal, published in that city, sent a reporter to Brussels for the king's speech, and with him a couple of carrier pigeons, to take back the document. At Brussels, he gave the pigeons in charge to a waiter, and called for breakfast. He was kept waiting for some time, but very delicious fricassee atoned for the delay. After breakfast, he paid his bill, and called for his carrier pigeons. "Pigeons!" exclaimed the waiter, "why you've eaten them!"

It seems that the snow bird is a very affectionate little creature. Some years ago, one of them flew into a house, where, finding itself quite welcome, it remained over night. By accident, however, it was killed; and, in the morning, one of the servants threw it into the yard. In the course of the day, one of the family witnessed a most affecting scene in connection with the dead body. Its mate was standing beside it, mourning its loss. It placed its bill below the head of its companion, raised it up, and again warbled its song of mourning. By and by, it flew away, and returned with a grain or two of wheat, which it dropped before its dead partner. Then it fluttered its wings, and endeavored to call the attention of the dead bird to the food. Again it flew away, again it returned, and used the same efforts as before. At last, it took up a kernel of the wheat, and dropped it into the mouth of the dead bird. This was repeated several times. Then the poor bereaved one sang in the same plaintive strain as before. But the scene was too affecting for the lady who witnessed it. She could bear the sight no longer, and turned away. I always loved the snow bird; but I have loved him more than ever since I heard this story.